

# t8code - modular adaptive mesh refinement in the exascale era

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## Summary

In this paper, we present our scalable dynamic adaptive mesh refinement (AMR) library t8code, which was officially released in 2022 (Holke et al., 2022). t8code is written in C/C++, open source, and readily available at [dlr-amr.github.io/t8code](https://dlr-amr.github.io/t8code). It is developed and maintained at the Institute of Software Technology of the German Aerospace Center (DLR). AMR is a widely used method of locally adapting the mesh resolution according to an adequate error indicator in grid-based applications, especially in the context of computational fluid dynamics. Our software library provides fast and memory efficient parallel algorithms for dynamic AMR to handle tasks such as mesh adaptation, load-balancing, ghost computation, feature search and more. t8code can manage meshes with over one trillion mesh elements (Holke et al., 2021) and scales up to one million parallel processes (Holke, 2018). It is intended to be used as a mesh management backend in scientific and engineering simulation codes, paving the way towards high-performance applications in the upcoming exascale era.

## Statement of Need

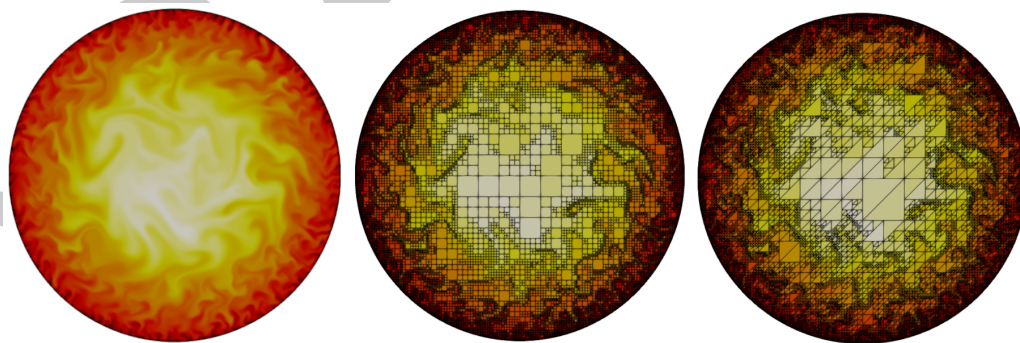
Adaptive Mesh Refinement has been established as a successful approach for scientific and engineering simulations over the past decades (Babuvška & Rheinboldt, 1978; Bangerth et al., 2007; Dörfler, 1996; Teunissen & Keppens, 2019). By modifying the mesh resolution locally according to problem specific indicators, the computational power is efficiently concentrated where needed and the overall memory usage is reduced by orders of magnitude. However, managing adaptive meshes and associated data is a very challenging task, especially for parallel codes. Implementing fast and scalable AMR routines generally leads to a large development overhead motivating the need for external mesh management libraries like t8code. Our target audiences are scientists and application developers working on grid-based simulation and visualization frameworks who are looking for a comprehensive and versatile mesh management solution. Besides offering AMR, we also aim to lower the threshold to parallelize their codes by solely interacting with t8code's API. Alternative AMR libraries with a similar range of features

are p4est (Burstedde et al., 2011a), libMesh (Kirk et al., 2006), PARAMESH (MacNeice et al., 2000), and SAMRAI (Gunney, 2013).

In contrast to the other AMR solutions, only t8code natively supports recursive refinement on a wide range of element types: vertices, lines, quadrilaterals, triangles, hexahedra, tetrahedra, prisms, and pyramids. Additionally, extensions to other refinement patterns and element shapes are straightforwardly supported due to t8code's modular code structure and clear distinction between low- and high-level mesh operations. This gives our AMR solution an unique position in the market catering to a wide range of use cases. Currently, t8code is optimized for grid-based applications using face-to-face connectivity between elements, such as Finite-Volume and Discontinuous Galerkin methods. In the future, we plan to support node-to-node connectivity and hanging nodes resolution to further increase the range of applications, such as Finite Element methods.

## Example application

Figure 1 depicts an example adapted mesh managed by t8code using two different element types: quads and triangles. The temperature profile of a convection simulation of a model planet's mantle (source: Institute of Planetary Research, DLR) is shown. The original, uniform mesh consists of over 158 million quad cells allocating 6.818 GB of memory. By applying AMR to the data, the memory usage can be reduced down to 20% with a compression error of less than 1%. The error measure was chosen to be the norm of the variance between refinement resp. coarsening steps. That is, starting from the uniform mesh at highest refinement level ( $l = 8$ ), the mesh was successively coarsened until the disagreement from the original data reached 1%. It should be noted that t8code's primary objective is to provide flexible adaptive mesh management. The layout of the data inside an element and its interpretation regarding, for example, when and how to refine/coarsen is up to the application.



**Figure 1:** Visualization of a planetary mantle convection simulation (source: Institute of Planetary Research, DLR). Shown is the 2D slice of the temperature profile. Left: original uniform data. The highlighting of the grid lines was omitted for visual clarity. Middle: adapted mesh with quad elements. Right: adapted mesh with triangle elements. The original data living on a uniform quad mesh was first transferred to a triangle mesh and adapted afterwards. This shows the versatility of t8code regarding to the choice of mesh elements.

## Fundamental Concepts

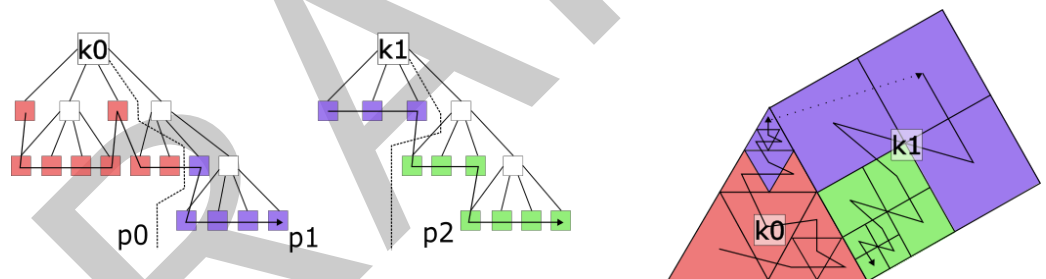
t8code is based on the forest-of-trees approach. The starting point for usage of t8code is an unstructured conformal input mesh, which we denote a coarse mesh. This coarse mesh describes the geometry of the computational domain and is usually provided by a mesh generator such as Gmsh (Geuzaine & Remacle, 2009). Each of the coarse mesh cells is then viewed as the root of a refinement tree. These trees are refined recursively in a structured pattern, resulting in a

72 collection of trees, which we call a forest. t8code stores only a minimal amount of information  
73 about the finest elements of the mesh—the leaves of the trees—in order to reconstruct the  
74 whole forest.

75 By enumerating the leaves in a recursive refinement pattern we obtain a space-filling curve  
76 (SFC) logic. Via these SFCs, all elements in a refinement tree are assigned an integer-based  
77 index and are stored in linear order. Element coordinates or element neighbors do not need to  
78 be stored explicitly but can be reconstructed from the SFC index. Fast bitwise SFC operations  
79 ensure optimal runtimes and diminish the need for memory lookups. Moreover, the SFC is  
80 used to distribute the forest mesh across multiple processes, so that each process only stores a  
81 unique portion of the SFC. See Figure 2 for an illustration of the concept.

82 While being successfully applied to quadrilateral and hexahedral meshes (Burstedde et al.,  
83 2011b; Weinzierl, 2019), these SFC techniques are extended by t8code in a modular fashion,  
84 such that arbitrary element shapes are supported. We achieve this modularity through a novel  
85 decoupling approach that separates high-level (mesh global) algorithms from low-level (element  
86 local) implementations. All high-level algorithms can be applied to different implementations  
87 of element shapes and refinement patterns. A mix of different element shapes in the same  
88 mesh is also supported.

89 Mesh adaptation as it is done in t8code leads to hanging nodes. Numerical methods have to  
90 specifically handle these non-conforming interfaces. Finite-Volume schemes or Discontinuous  
91 Galerkin methods naturally treat this problem via so-called mortar methods. In the future, it  
92 is planned to also support hanging nodes resolving routines by inserting transition elements  
93 conformally connecting elements at different refinement levels.



**Figure 2:** Left: Exemplary t8code forest mesh consisting of two trees (k0, k1) distributed over three parallel processes p0 to p2. The SFC is represented by a black curve tracing only the finest elements (leaves) of each tree. Right: Sketch of the associated mixed shape (a triangle and a quad) mesh refined up to level three.

## 94 Performance

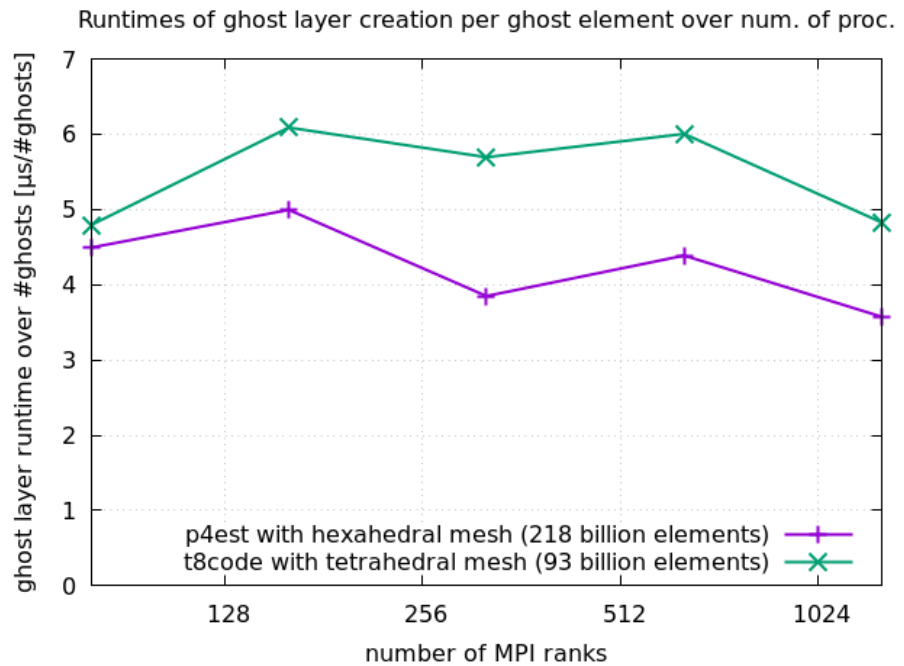
95 t8code supports distributed coarse meshes of arbitrary size and complexity, which we tested  
96 for up to 370 million coarse mesh cells (Burstedde & Holke, 2017). Moreover, we conducted  
97 various performance studies on the JUQUEEN and the JUWELS supercomputers at the Jülich  
98 Supercomputing Center. In Table 1, (Holke et al., 2021) we show that t8code's ghost routine  
99 is exceptionally fast with proper scaling of up to 1.1 trillion mesh elements. Computing ghost  
100 layers around parallel domains is usually the most expensive of all mesh operations. To put  
101 these results into perspective, we conducted scaling tests on the terrabyte cluster at Leibniz  
102 Supercomputing Centre comparing the ghost layer creation runtimes of p4est and t8code. In  
103 Figure 3 the measured runtimes of both libraries are plotted over the number of processes. The  
104 p4est library has been established as one of the most performant meshing libraries (Burstedde  
105 et al., 2011a) specializing on adaptive quadrilateral and hexahedral meshes. Clearly, t8code  
106 shows near perfect scaling for tetrahedral meshes on par with p4est. The absolute runtime  
107 of t8code is around 1.5 times the runtime of p4est measured on a per ghost element basis.

108 This is expected since the ghost layer algorithm is more complex and thus a bit less optimized,  
109 while supporting a wider range of element types.

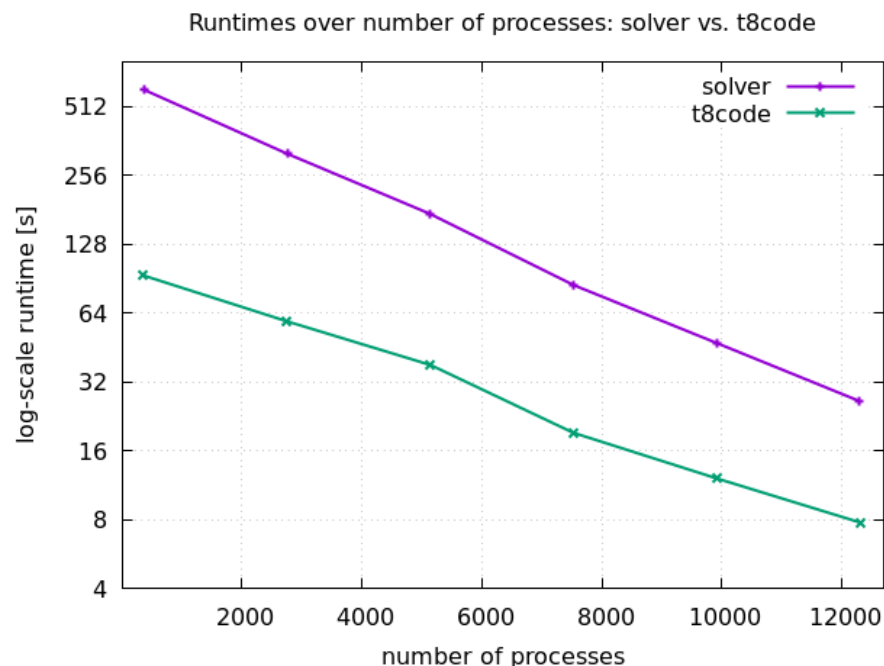
110 Furthermore, in a prototype code (Dreyer, 2021) implementing a high-order Discontinuous  
111 Galerkin (DG) method for advection-diffusion equations on dynamically adaptive hexahedral  
112 meshes, we can report of a 12 times speed-up compared to non-AMR meshes with only an  
113 overall 15% runtime contribution of t8code. In Figure 4 we compare the runtimes over number  
114 of processes of the DG solver and the summed mesh operations done by t8code, which are ghost  
115 computation, ghost data exchange, partitioning (load balancing), refinement, and coarsening,  
116 as well as balancing ensuring only a difference of one refinement level among element's face  
117 neighbors. From the graphs in Figure 4 we clearly see that t8code only takes around 15% to  
118 20% of overall runtime compared to the solver.

# Process	# Elements	# Elem. / process	Ghost
49,152	1,099,511,627,776	22,369,621	2.08 s
98,304	1,099,511,627,776	11,184,811	1.43 s

Table 1: Runtimes on JUQUEEN for the ghost layer computation for a distributed mesh consisting of 1.1 trillion elements.



**Figure 3:** Runtimes of ghost layer creation on the terrabyte cluster for p4est and t8code. The meshes have been refined into a Menger sponge for the hexahedral mesh with p4est (max. level 12) and a Sierpinski sponge for the tetrahedral mesh in t8code (max. level 13) to create a fractal pattern with billions of elements as a stress test. To make the two runs comparable, the runtimes have been divided by the average local number of ghost elements on a MPI rank.



**Figure 4:** Runtimes on JUQUEEN of the solver and summed mesh operations of our DG prototype code coupled with t8code. Mesh operations are ghost computation, ghost data exchange, partitioning (load balancing), refinement, and coarsening, as well as balancing (max. difference of one level of refinement of neighboring elements). t8code only takes around 15% to 20% of the overall runtime.

## Research Projects

Even though t8code is a newcomer to the market, it is already in use as the mesh management backend in various research projects, most notably in the earth system modeling (ESM) community. In the [ADAPTEX](#) project, t8code is integrated with the [Trixi framework](#) ([Schlottke-Lakemper et al., 2020](#)), a modern computational fluid dynamics code written in [Julia](#). Over the next years several ESM applications are planned to couple to this combination, including [MESSy](#), [MPTrac](#) and [SERGHEI](#). Moreover, t8code also plays an important role in several DLR funded research projects, e.g., [VisPlore](#) (massive data visualization), [HYTAZER](#) (hydrogen tank certification), and [Greenstars](#) (additive rocket engine manufacturing).

## Further Information

For further information beyond this short note and also for code examples, we refer to our [Documentation](#) and [Wiki](#) reachable via our homepage [dlr-amr.github.io/t8code](https://dlr-amr.github.io/t8code) and our technical publications on t8code ([Becker, 2021](#); [Burstedde & Holke, 2016, 2017](#); [Dreyer, 2021](#); [Elsweijer, 2021, 2022](#); [Fußbroich, 2023](#); [Holke, 2018](#); [Holke et al., 2021, 2022](#); [Knapp, 2020](#); [Lilikakis, 2022](#)).

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The authors state that there are no conflicts of interest.

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